CHRIST INCOGNITO
May 16, 2004
The Celebration of 90 Years
on Michigan Avenue

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 100
Matthew 25:31–46

"Truly, just as you did it to one of the least of these members of my family, you did it to me."
Matthew 25:40 (NRSV)

My soul's desire and prayer to God for this church
is that its heart may be like unto the heart of God,
that heart that loves every child of earth. . . .
Oh, that this church may be bigger than any one creed,
sect or class or race or color.
May it be so big that any human being may feel at home here,
may draw nigh to God here.
May it be the mission of this church to tell every person in unmistakable terms
how dear we are—preciously dear—to God,
and then to live those words in the magnanimity of its welcome,
the warmth of its fellowship, and the generosity of its devotion.

James McClure, President, McCormick Theological Seminary
from the Historical Service (May 12, 1914),
one of a weeklong series of celebrations to dedicate the new building of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago

Dear God, we thank you for your church gathering this morning, this day, as the sun circles the earth in every land, to praise your name and hear your word.
We thank you today for this church, this building, which for ninety years has welcomed, sheltered, nurtured, comforted, and inspired your people.
We thank you today for the blessing, the privilege, of gathering here again to worship you. Startle us with your truth once again in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Ninety years ago, a huge construction project was completed on the growing North Side of Chicago. The structure was big, prominent; people watched for months as it rose higher and higher. The structure was

destined to play a major role in the life of the community. Thousands and thousands of people would enter its doors over the years, bringing with them their love and passion and, most of all, their hope. Thousands of people would enter the structure and find themselves inspired and thrilled. Every time they would stand and sing together, eat and drink together, rejoice and be glad together. And in somber, dark times, they would come to be together in grief and disappointment. Ninety years later, people would still be crowding in within its storied walls. Ten years before its centennial, people would come to see it from all over the world, enter its gates, look up and give thanks to God. Ninety years ago, Wrigley Field opened its gates for the first time.

Just three weeks later, Sunday, May 10, 1914, another building opened its doors for the first time: the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago.

It is our birthday this week. This wonderful building is ninety years old. In our home, birthdays are the occasion for telling stories, remembering how it was when the new baby arrived, who did what and said what, how nervous and excited everyone was, how we telephoned grandparents and aunts and uncles all over the country to share the great news. So let's indulge ourselves briefly with our story.

Fourth Presbyterian Church is older than this building. The congregation was chartered in 1871, renovated an older building at the corner of Indiana and Cass, and held its first worship service on Sunday morning, October 8, 1871. That evening, Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over the lantern and the great Chicago fire leveled much of the city, including the newly renovated Fourth Presbyterian Church. There were 800 members, and all but five of the families lost their homes in the fire, including its pastor, David Swing, who lost everything, including his library and 700 sermon manuscripts. The congregation gathered itself, worshiped in a theater for a while, built a new building, and dedicated it on January 4, 1874, on the corner of Rush and Superior. Fourth Presbyterian Church thrived and continued to grow and in 1909 called to its pulpit one of the outstanding Presbyterian preachers and leaders in the nation, from Baltimore, John Timothy Stone. Dr. Stone's son George has honored us with his presence this morning and is sitting in Pew 13, his family's pew when his father was in the pulpit.

Within three years of Stone's arrival, the congregation made the most remarkable and courageous and farsighted decision in its history. It purchased this piece of property before there was a bridge over the river on Michigan Avenue—Pine Avenue then—with the lakeshore just across the street where the John Hancock building stands. And then they had the vision to hire the preeminent Gothic architect in America, Ralph Adams Cram from Boston, to design a fine Presbyterian church. Cram teamed up with a distinguished Chicago architect, Howard Van Doren Shaw. Cram

designed this sanctuary. He also designed parts of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan and the chapels at West Point and Princeton. Shaw designed the rest of the building. Shaw loved this project so much that he gave the church the lovely children's fountain in the Garth. The ceiling was designed and executed by Frederic C. Bartlett, and our wonderful windows —which we will be restoring and releading—were done by Charles J. Connick.

The new building was acclaimed immediately. The September 1914 issue of *The Architectural Record* devoted a major review to Crams' new church and called Fourth Presbyterian Church "a living, breathing, spiritual thing . . . a marvel of grace, beauty, and dignity."

Those are good and accurate words: "living, breathing, grace, dignity, beauty." Every Sunday morning I walk down Michigan Avenue and enter the sanctuary: the lights are all on, John Sherer is practicing, ushers and house staff are making last minute preparations for the 2,500 or so people who will come to worship. It's a good way to start the day—looking up into this wonderful sacred space, these hallowed walls, with angels overhead, praising God with lute, harp, trumpet and cymbal, standing up there for ninety years.

The church is not the building. The church is the people. The building is the building the church uses for worship, education, and service. The building is a resource, a tool to be used. Protestants particularly have had something of a love-hate relationship with their church buildings. Heirs of the Puritans, we're never sure that we should be investing so much in our real estate. But it is a mistake, I believe, to denigrate church buildings. Buildings say something about what happens in them, about life and the human condition. Roger Kennedy, former Director of the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian, published a handsome coffee table book, *American Churches*. Kennedy wrote, "Any visitor to New York who stands on Fifth Avenue between Rockefeller Center and 57th Street can see that, in the glassy shadow of the skyscrapers, there lurks an older way of stating reality." He's referring, of course, to St. Patrick's Cathedral and St. Thomas and Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. The same observation is made here. This building, surrounded by skyscrapers and hotels and retail department stores, which themselves make a reality statement about our culture—Water Tower Place, Lord and Taylor, Marshall Field, The Four Seasons, Paul Stuart where you can purchase a necktie for $200 and a shirt for $400. It's not a bad reality statement. But we do provide a balance, an alternate reality statement about transcendence and holiness and mystery and meaning.

But this building is not the church. It is a precious and important resource, an asset. You are the church, and church is what happens here and in the community because of you.

I love what James McClure, President of McCormick Theological Seminary, said on Tuesday evening of the same week in 1914 when the building first opened. They dedicated it all week long, by the way. There were services starting on Saturday night with a service "to the workers" by Dr. Stone, several on Sunday and nightly through the week. Tuesday night was called the Historical Evening, and it was on that occasion that Dr. McClure said, "Oh, that this church may be bigger than one creed, sect or class or race or color" — progressive and prophetic words ninety years ago.

I like even more what the chair of the Building Committee, Thomas Jones, said in response:

> Whether this large expenditure which has been made here, whether all the skill and labor that have been expended on these structures shall prove to have been justified, time alone can answer! And the answer when it comes will be in terms of the service, the lives that shall be built here, the spirit that shall go out from here and enter the life of the community.

Ninety years later, here we are, and the meaning and validity of this project, this building, this church, still rests on the service rendered, the lives transformed, the spirit that goes out from here and enters the life of the community.

> "When did we see you hungry and give you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? . . . When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? When was it we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"
>
> "When you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, members of my family, you did it to me."

Jesus said that. They are profound, radical words. The very day I wrote this sermon, I walked right by half a dozen people, poor people, some selling *Street Wise*, others asking for money, one was a family—a mother and three children. One accosted me as I arrived at the church. He was, I think, waiting for me. "I just had surgery and I'm hungry," he said as he lifted his T-shirt to reveal an ugly surgical scar. "Come in," I said, "our Social Service Center will help you." He swore. "I don't need their help; I need money." Matthew 25 makes me very uncomfortable when I think about it much. I can't help everyone. I don't have either the money or the time. Besides who

can tell who is really needy and who simply wants a bottle of cheap wine. What can I do?

What I can and am called to do is to remember what Jesus said: “When you did it to the one of the least of these, my family, you did it to me”—not, please notice, just the certifiably hungry and truly deserving. The only criteria he set was “least of these,” which means weak, vulnerable, the little ones, particularly the small ones, the children. So what you and I can and are called to do is not ignore and overlook, but look into a human face and see there the face of Jesus Christ, because that is what he said.

I don’t know about you, but I read with a heavy heart this week “I was in prison and you visited me.” Not just the community jail where last night’s vagrants and drunks are drying out, not just infamous concentration camps, run by evil tyrants, but “prison,” he said, as in Abu Ghraib, I suppose. What he said makes my heart heavy. What American service people did to Iraqi prisoners is not only wrong and incredibly counterproductive, damaging to American credibility and the entire effort to bring democracy and freedom to the Middle East, it offends the one who told us to look for him in the faces of prisoners, and it is making the difficult and dangerous task we have asked precious young American men and women to do for us infinitely more difficult and dangerous.

Elaine Pagels says Jesus’ words are the basis for a radical new social structure based on the God-given dignity and value of every human being. Human beings are not to be abused and tortured, not because they are wonderful—my guess is that many, if not most, of the people in Abu Ghraib are not. They are not to be abused and humiliated and tortured because Jesus said he’s there with them; “What you do to prisoners, you do to me,” he said. So yes, in his name, we must expect and demand more from our military leaders and our politicians: accountability and responsibility, careful supervision and high standards of conduct. “Because they do it to us” doesn’t matter. Jesus calls us to something higher and better than that.

“What you do for and to the least of these—sick, hungry, homeless, oppressed, imprisoned—you do to me,” Jesus said.

In these familiar words of Jesus are three profoundly important ideas.

The first is a statement about God. The God of Jesus, the God of the Bible, is not a remote supreme being on a throne up there above the clouds or out there somewhere in the mysterious reaches of the universe. The God of Jesus is not like the gods of the Greeks and Romans, passively observing the world and human history from a safely neutral distance. No, Jesus said, God is here, in the messiness and ambiguity of human life. God is here, particularly in your neighbor, the one who needs you. You want to see the

face of God? Look into the face of one of the least of these, the vulnerable, the weak, the children.

The second radical statement is about the practice of religion. You can't read the paper and not be concerned about the role religion plays in the world. Terrible atrocities are committed by men shouting "God is great." Religious officials hide clergy abuse, deny sacraments to those with whom they disagree. Religious leaders condemn each other, excommunicate each other, invest inordinate amounts of energy and resources fighting one another over who gets in and who is kept out, over whose doctrinal formulas are true and whose are false—over a whole laundry list of issues about which Jesus had absolutely nothing to say.

But he did say this: "When you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."

Martin Marty recently highlighted a paragraph from the book *Doing the Truth in Love* that commented on Matthew 25:

> The New Testament has a great deal about the end of the world, but there is not a syllable describing any criteria for the last judgment except Matthew 25. And notice—there is not a word about whether you belonged to the church or were baptized, not a syllable about whether you ever celebrated the Eucharist or prayed, or what creed you preferred or what theology. Indeed, there is nothing specifically religious at all. The only criterion for the last judgment is "Did you give yourself away to those who needed you?" (*Context*, April 2004, Michael Hines, *Doing the Truth in Love*)

The third most important thing about this subject, however, is not social, political, economic, or religious. It is personal. God wants not only a new world modeled on the values of Jesus, God wants you. God is not a social engineer but a God of love who wants to save your soul, to use the language of the old revival meetings.

God wants to save your soul and redeem you and give you the gift of life—true, deep, authentic human life.

God wants to save you by touching your heart with love. God wants to save you by persuading you to care and see other human beings who need you.

God wants to save you from obsessing about your self, your own needs, by persuading you to forget about yourself and worry about others.

That is God's favorite project: to teach you and me the fundamental lesson, the secret, the truth, that to love is to live.

Ninety years old, and the days and months immediately ahead of us are as important and exciting and promising as any this church has ever lived in those nine decades.

As a community of faith, blessed with this wonderful building, blessed with a rich heritage of faithful mission with our neighbors, we have a decision to make about our future. We have a precious asset, the value of the air rights over our building. We have a plan that preserves and enhances this beautiful building and converts those air rights into resources to strengthen our church for the future and to extend our mission further and more deeply into our community.

Thanks be to God for the legacy our predecessors have given us.

Thanks be to God for the privilege of being part of this church in these exciting days; in Mr. Jones's good words:

"The answer to the question of whether the expenditure was worth it, will be in our service, and the lives that are transformed and the spirit that goes out from here and enters the life of the community."

Last Saturday, this church did something that I believe Dr. McClure, Mr. Jones, and John Timothy Stone would approve. In fact, maybe they're having a reunion in heaven and talking about it today.

We own property on Chicago Avenue, on the edge of Cabrini-Green. We hope to build a community center there, but for now we have created a community garden. Some of us put our tomatoes and lettuce and radishes in yesterday. Last Saturday the garden was created: loads of wood chips, topsoil, rich compost were dumped, shoveled, moved around, and arranged into thirty-six neat plots. Buckets full of wonderful worms were introduced to each plot, where they will enrich, aerate, and fertilize happily for years. Fourth Church volunteers worked all day. The idea is to reach out to neighbors, to form partnerships. The president and vice president of the Neighborhood Association came over and observed and greeted us. Several people, some children, joined the work immediately and stayed all day. One elderly woman, a Cabrini resident, stayed on the perimeter all morning, watching. When we gathered to pray together to consecrate the day, she joined the circle. Her name is Mrs. Jones, she said. By the end of the day, she was in close, still very quiet. Finally, when the work was done, she said, "That one is mine. I want that plot." And from her coat pocket she pulled a packet of seeds and with a little help got down on her knees and scored a small trench in the fresh soil and planted her seeds.

Mrs. Jones was back yesterday. Her seeds have sprouted; the first life in that desolate place for years. We talked some. We told her who we were. “Oh,” she said, “Fourth Presbyterian Church. I took my daughters for tutoring there. They are in their 40s now. I used to walk them over to that wonderful church once a week.”

A small moment—full of the wonder and mystery and promise of Jesus.

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.

Amen.